

OUR URGENT NEED -

A CONSERVATION-MINDED PUBLIC

by VICTOR E. F. SOLMAN, Ph. D.

John Burroughs<sup>1</sup> said, many years ago "The most precious things in life are near at hand, without money and without price. Each of you has the whole wealth of the universe at your very door. All that I ever had, and still have, may be yours by stretching forth your hand and taking it."

With increasing population and the associated expanding exploitation of natural resources the time will come, indeed, has come already in some areas, when John Burroughs' comforting words are no longer true.

Aldo Leopold<sup>2</sup> must have felt much as Burroughs did. However, he foresaw the destructive changes which have increased steadily since the time when he wrote:

"We of the industrial age boast of our control over nature. Plant or animal, star or atom, wind or river, there is no force in earth or sky which we will not shortly harness to build 'The Good Life' for ourselves. But what is the good life? Is all this glut of power to be used for only bread-and-butter ends? Man cannot live by bread, or Fords, alone. Are we too poor in purse or spirit to apply some of it to keep the land pleasant to see, and good to live in?"

"Every countryside proclaims the fact that we have, today, less control in the field of conservation than in any other contact with surrounding nature. We patrol the air and the ether, but we do not keep filth out of our creeks and rivers. We stand guard over works of art, but species representing the work of aeons are stolen from under our noses."

These words ring true today as they did in 1933, even though much new wildlife information has been secured and many of the mysteries of that day have been explained.

We have known for decades many of the basic principles of wildlife conservation and management, but we still make the same old mistakes. We still pollute our rivers, cut down our timber faster than it grows, and speed up the rate of exploitation of resources. A hundred years ago our ancestors exploited the great auk to extermination. The same fate befell the heath hen, the Labrador duck and the passenger pigeon, and other species throughout the world. Have we learned the lesson, or will our generation be responsible for the loss of the California condor, the Key deer and other irreplaceable treasures.

1. JOHN BURROUGHS AMERICA, edited by Farida A. Wiley, The Devin Adair Company, New York, 1951, page 3.
2. GAME MANAGEMENT, by Aldo Leopold, Charles Schribner's Sons, New York, London 1933. Page vii.

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Not only are we too often blindly following the old trails to disaster, but we are going downgrade faster than ever in the name of progress. In Canada and elsewhere the increasing human population cries for more timber from the shrinking forests, more electric power from the rivers and more land under crops even if inferior land has to be taken from the marshes and the woodlands. The validity of certain of these demands on our resources is recognized but, through careful planning, we can often harmonize these demands with wise use of forests, soil, water and wildlife in the interests of all.

We have a striking example of this conflict of interests today in Western Canada. Waterfowl in that great breeding area had been seriously reduced by the encroachment of agriculture on their habitat. Many agencies, both private and governmental, worked hard to improve conditions and to restore, at least partly, the waterfowl populations of former times. What happened? Increased waterfowl numbers and modern harvesting methods combined to produce unprecedented crop damage; and many prairie farmers now classify waterfowl with grasshoppers, as destructive pests. We believe that careful planning and a sincere desire for co-operation on the part of all interests can eliminate, or at least markedly ameliorate this situation.

Our civilization is striving toward a constantly rising standard of living. But, with increasing human populations, our economy must continually expand even to maintain our standard of living at its present level. The result is a pressing demand for continual increase in the rate of exploitation of our renewable natural resources. Under this pressure the problem of wise evaluation and use of these resources has become acute, and it is not surprising that for lack of knowledge and guidance administrators have often chosen a wrong course of action.

In 1948, just before he died, Leopold<sup>3</sup> said:

"Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question whether a still higher 'Standard of living' is worth its cost in things natural, wild and free. For us in the minority the opportunity to see geese is more important than television, and the chance to find a pasque-flower is a right as inalienable as free speech.

"These wild things, I admit, had little human value until mechanization assured us of a good breakfast, and until science disclosed the drama of where they come from and how they live. The whole conflict boils down to a question of degree. We of the minority see a law of diminishing returns in progress; our opponents do not."

While I agree with Leopold I believe that the majority of the people, who do not now appreciate wildlife and who consequently are unwitting assistants to its depletion, are unfortunate in that they do not have clear statements of uses

3. A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC, by Aldo Leopold, Oxford University Press, New York 1949. Page vii.



and values of wildlife constantly placed before them. They contribute to the steady destruction of renewable resources not through malice, but through ignorance of any other method of use. Our greatest need, then, is to reach these people and to put before them now, often and continually, the facts which will help them to understand and appreciate wildlife and so help them to become willing workers for its defense.

The wasteful and unnecessary expansion of resource utilization is often supported by the majority of the public because the only convincing argument put forward is in its favour.

Discussing education in wildlife management Dr. Ira Gabrielson<sup>4</sup> has stated:

"The greatest obstacle to an intelligent wildlife management program is the lack of clear public thinking, based on sound information. Because of public ignorance, it is often easy for special interests to cloud issues and prevent good management by obtaining public opposition to sound proposals or support for stupid and disastrous programs. This has been the history of the management of renewable natural resources whether soils, forest, waters, or wildlife. Much of our forest wealth has been depleted; the Great Lakes fishery largely destroyed; the immense big game herds destroyed or reduced to pitiful remnants of their former abundance; and our rivers and lakes often rendered non-productive by pollution -- all on specious reasoning that could command public support or at least public acquiescence. In each case far-sighted men foresaw the disastrous results of unsound management ... Such activities, by no means merely historical, still continue in the form of unjustified drainage projects and uneconomic construction of huge dams. This fact emphasizes the importance of conservation education programs."

Our ability to manage wildlife is now becoming adequate for most needs but our ability in human management still lags far behind since our methods of securing public understanding of the principles of conservation have proved inadequate. Only when the public understand fully and are convinced of the desirability of certain actions will they demand and support policies which will lead to a wise solution to our problems.

Unless we can find some better way to make the public realize the need for conservation, we must rely on the ever wider distribution of conservation knowledge and information in the hope that this will result increasingly in public co-operation in resource conservation.

The Canadian Wildlife Service produces and distributes to the public several types of leaflets and booklets which provide information on phases of wildlife conservation, ranging from the building of bird houses to the

4. WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT, by Ira N. Gabrielson, The MacMillan Co., New York 1951. Page 36.



ecology of wolves in certain National Parks. The Service supplements the written material with still and moving pictures, film strips, and lectures by suitably trained officers. Much valuable publicity work in all these fields is also carried out in Canada by other agencies including federal and provincial government departments and private organizations.

Many of these agencies, including the Canadian Wildlife Service, are unable to assign adequate staff to the large and exceedingly important job of preparing, for popular consumption and understanding, the findings of modern scientific research in the conservation field. This is a real handicap since most of the research scientists have neither the required journalistic skill nor the time free from scientific research to prepare adequate popular articles. Many journalists, while they can write in a way which is pleasing to, and easily understood by, the public, have not the background of scientific training to enable them to prepare adequate articles from the results of scientific research.

This situation is widely recognized and this year the first few scholarships in biological journalism are being established at United States centres. The need is urgent, however, and many years will pass before there are enough qualified conservation-trained journalists. In the meantime all of us must do everything in our power to increase the flow of useful conservation information to the public, lest still further losses occur.

Until the amount of conservation information reaching the public is greatly increased we will continue, as at present, to barely counteract the mis-information and the repetition of folk tales which are a part of our heritage of despoliation rather than of conservation.

An Ottawa radio commentator recently remarked that two boys who had picked up an injured sparrow hawk and ministered to its wants were guilty of harbouring a bird as destructive in its way as a man-eating tiger. On her next broadcast, she apologized for this mis-information and thanked one of her listeners for drawing to her attention the beneficial characteristics of this bird. Better public relations for wildlife would have prevented the mistake in the first broadcast. This type of ignorance occurs daily in press and radio, and detracts from the small amount of useful information which conservation agencies release.

It is unlikely that any change of public attitude will occur, without the right kind of information being put before the public continually in a way that can and will be appreciated and assimilated.

At the Seventeenth North American Wildlife Conference one whole session was devoted to "Effective Public Relations". Seven papers were delivered, each followed by much discussion. Some state organizations reported the success of their recently expanded public relations programmes, others lamented the lack of similar effective contact with their public.

Joseph J. Shomon<sup>5</sup>, in a forceful paper, made the following statement:

5. EDUCATION IN RESOURCE USE: OUR MOST CHALLENGING TASK IN HUMAN RELATIONS, by Joseph J. Shomon. Trans. Seventeenth North American Wildlife Conference. Miami, 1952.



"The most overwhelming task before conservationists today is proper recognition for the wise use of natural resources by the masses of the people. Scientists are fully aware of our resource status, but the American people are not. We conservationists gathered here are familiar with the picture, but the public is not. The great and challenging task ahead, then, is adequate information and education with respect to the intelligent care and use of our life's sustaining resources -- teaching our 150 million Americans basic concepts of conservation and how to live in a wholesome and balanced environment."

In the same session Dr. Walter P. Taylor said "Effective and helpful public relations requires telling the people what is going on in such a way that they will aggressively support action for the greatest good of the largest number of people over the longest time".

Adrien Ter Louw of the Eastman Kodak Company's Camera Club and School Service summed up the thought of the session with wise advice on the way to reach and hold people's attention.

He feels that we must know and understand the people we wish to influence, know their likes and their prejudices. We must decide what we want them to do and know why they are not doing this without our encouragement. We must be sure that our argument is understood in order that the action pattern we suggest may be followed.

To be effective public information on conservation must be easily understood. It must be consistent in placing little emphasis on lesser points on which we may differ while stressing the major aims for which we all strive.

We are agreed, I hope, on the need for more effective public distribution of conservation information and have considered some of the ways in which this may best be done. The job now ahead for all agencies which issue conservation information, is to co-ordinate their efforts and to spread the information, in its most easily understood forms as far and wide as possible. Our aim should be that every man, woman and child in North America is not only aware of the meaning of conservation, but also of his or her duty to assure that our standard of living is not degraded by the continued misuse of our renewable resources. This will ensure that the esthetic and other great values of our heritage may be preserved intact for future generations.

Canadian Wildlife Service, July, 1954. From Proceedings 42nd Convention, International Association of Game, Fish and Conservation Commissioners; reprinted in Forest and Outdoors, June, 1954.

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Our urgent need-- a conservation minded public.





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